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וזוגתו מרת חנה ומשפחתם שיחיו
קאלער



A BATTLE OF GOOD VS. EVIL

The Alter Rebbe's Fight Against Napoleon

“I hate him with thorough hatred,” said the Alter Rebbe, “for he is the Satan who opposes good with every kind of evil. He is the ultimate *kelipa* and harsh judgment, the opposite of *chesed* and *tov*, he is only death and evil, and his whole life force is to do evil, like a leech.”¹

These harsh words, frightening even 200 years later, especially coming from the mouth of the Alter Rebbe himself, were said about Napoleon Bonaparte, the French general who declared himself emperor of France and set out to conquer all of Europe.

What did Napoleon do to earn the wrath of the Alter Rebbe? Most Jewish leaders welcomed Napoleon and he was treated as a hero wherever he conquered. In France he granted full rights to the Jews. So what led the Alter Rebbe to hold him in such opposition?

SIGN OF MOSHIACH

As Napoleon was marching through Europe, it became clear that his final battle would be against the Russian Empire. Only Russia stood between him and his goal of being the first “Emperor of the World.”

The French armies quickly conquered Poland, and stood at the border of Russia.

Among Russian Jews, a fierce debate was raging.

On one hand, life in Russia was no picnic. Jews did not have equal rights and many lived in crushing poverty. Napoleon was seen as a liberator, a welcome savior who would rescue the Jews from the Czar.

On the other hand, Napoleon was a ruthless dictator. He showed no mercy on the battlefield, even remarking once, “There is no smell sweeter than the corpses of enemy soldiers.”

He believed only in himself and his ego knew no bounds. He declared that he stopped believing in G-d at 13 years old, and that “there cannot be a pope

and an emperor, there can only be an emperor.”²

Yet precisely because of his *apirkorsus*, many *tzaddikim* of various Chassidic courts supported him.

They believed that he was the fulfillment of the Gemara³ that before Moshiach comes *apirkorsus* will spread. Let Napoleon win, they said; he will spread his non-belief, setting the stage for Moshiach. Then all the *tzaddikim* of the generation will band together to bring the Jews back to belief in Hashem and Moshiach will come.

So some leaders believed Napoleon was good while others knew he was evil but welcomed him anyway, believing this was a sign of Moshiach coming.

The Alter Rebbe was the only Jewish leader who was completely opposed to Napoleon. He said it was wrong to actively promote non-belief in Hashem just because it's a sign of Moshiach coming. He looked at Napoleon as a *gzeira min haShamayim*, which would eventually go away. But the longer he stuck around, the longer his evil effect would last.⁴

FONYEH GANEV

During the war, the Alter Rebbe once had a meeting with one of the other Rebbes who announced, “*Fonyeh* (referring to the Czar) *ganev*, *Fonyeh no'ef*, *Fonyeh rotzai'ach*.” *Fonyeh* was a disparaging term for Russians in general and using it for the Czar was additionally insulting.

In other words: “Why are you supporting the Czar, isn't he a murderer just like Napoleon?”

The Alter rebbe answered in his unique tune: “*Fonyeh ganev*, *Fonyeh no'ef*, *Fonyeh rotzai'ach*, *ober er iz nisht*

ma'alam af Echod. True the Czar has his faults, but at least he is not against belief in Hashem.”⁵

GOG U'MAGOG

Many Rebbes of that period said that the impending war between France and Russia was the war of *Gog U'Magog*, the final massive war that will herald Moshiach's arrival. And Napoleon had to win.

The following story highlights the extent of their support for Napoleon. Once, Reb Naftali of Ropshitz was by his Rebbe, Reb Mendel of Rimanov. The *beis midrash* of the Rimanover was full of fathers crying that their sons had been sent to the war to fight Napoleon. They begged Reb Mendel to give them a *bracha* that their sons should come home safely but the Rimanover wouldn't even allow them into his room.

Reb Naftali couldn't contain himself and cried to his Rebbe, “These people are coming to you with broken hearts, at least listen to their cries!”

Reb Mendel answered, “Let them go to war; as long as Moshiach will come in the end.”⁶

This was the attitude the Alter Rebbe was up against.

TWO OPPOSITES

The Alter Rebbe saw in the Czar and Napoleon total opposites.

In a fascinating letter, the Mittlerer Rebbe lays out the differences between them:

[Napoleon is] one who raises himself up to say, “It is all my strength and power,” and removes any thought or belief in Hashem. Such a person, Hashem will cast down to complete downfall and humiliation, in order to show him that only Hashem has

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power. We clearly see that his downfall came because of his pride and ego, saying to Hashem “Leave me alone!” (Iyov 21:14).

It is known how he used to make fun of people who believed in Hashem. May he be uprooted and destroyed and leave no remnant.

True goodness, however, is the exact opposite of this. It comes together with humility and *bittul*, to believe that it is not one’s own power and strength that gives him success. For even if one is extraordinarily successful, he doesn’t take the credit for his success; on the contrary, it is clear as daylight to him that only Hashem decides the fate of wars. Therefore, he places his complete faith in Hashem to guide him on the proper path and one who lowers himself, Hashem raises him up.

This attitude is clearly seen by anyone who knows even a little bit about our master the Czar, may he be glorified, and his ministers and advisors. We all saw their humility and how greatly they trust in Hashem. Even now that he was victorious, he does not take credit for himself, rather he says that the victory came from Hashem. This is the victory of *chesed* and good becoming stronger, and automatically the enemy who is pure evil falls away completely without leaving even a vestige or a survivor.

The most important thing is what my father (the Alter Rebbe) used to say about the foundation of Jewish belief, that it only has a

Victory would go to the Rebbe who blew *shofar* first on Rosh Hashanah.

secure future under the rulership of our master the Czar, may he be glorified, for he believes in Hashem and appreciates those who serve G-d truthfully. As such, he wants to strengthen the Jewish faith and certainly does not want to uproot Jews from their faith at all.⁷

This attitude was not limited to the leaders. The Russian soldiers would all pray together before every battle, hundreds of thousands of men fell to their knees and prayed for a safe return.

Napoleon’s army, on the other hand, never prayed, and there is no mention of any religious leader accompanying the French army. In fact, we know this from diaries of the French soldiers in which they mock the Russians’ custom to pray.

The Czar Alexander firmly believed that Divine Providence led him to the moment where he would be the one to make peace in Europe. He was constantly surrounded by religious advisors.

When the war broke out, the Czar concluded his first speech to the whole army by saying, “You are protecting our faith, our homeland, and our freedom! G-d is against the enemy!”

The Russian commander-in-chief, Kotozov, would also motivate his troops with the announcement, “By our faith in G-d we will be victorious or die!” and “Soldiers of Russia, G-d is your general!”

Napoleon motivated his troops with visions of fame and glory. The Russians were fighting for G-d while the French fought for honor and selfishness.

The French religious leadership once announced a day of prayer for the army; Napoleon ordered them to “stop this nonsense.”

THE MARCH BEGINS

Exactly as the Alter Rebbe predicted, so it came to be. Napoleon should have stayed in Poland and ruled all of Western Europe, but his pride and ego pushed him east to invade Russia, against the advice of all his generals.

As Napoleon approached Minsk, the Alter Rebbe said he would rather choose death than life under him, and began preparations for a long and dangerous flight deep into Russia.

The whole family escaped Liadi toward the end of Av 5572, riding in 20 wagons, each pulled by two horses. For months they were one step ahead of the enemy, sometimes only a few miles away from the battlefield.

In every city they passed, the Alter Rebbe relayed vital information about the enemy to the Russian generals. They were so close to the battlefield that they were sometimes even able to count the number of cannons the French had, and correct knowledge of this could mean defeat or victory for the Russian army.

The conditions on the road were terrible. Many nights were spent on

MOSCOW, CIRCA MID 1800S.



the side of the road, sleeping in the woods in the bitter cold. Sometimes the Alter Rebbe would order the wagon drivers to drive on Shabbos, as it was a matter of life and death to stay ahead of the fighting.⁸

RACE TO BLOW

Rosh Hashanah came and the caravan found itself in the village of Teriza Zerka.

The French were coming closer and closer to Moscow and the situation looked dire.

It is told that one of the Alter Rebbe's main opponents over the Napoleon issue was the Maggid of Koznitz.⁹

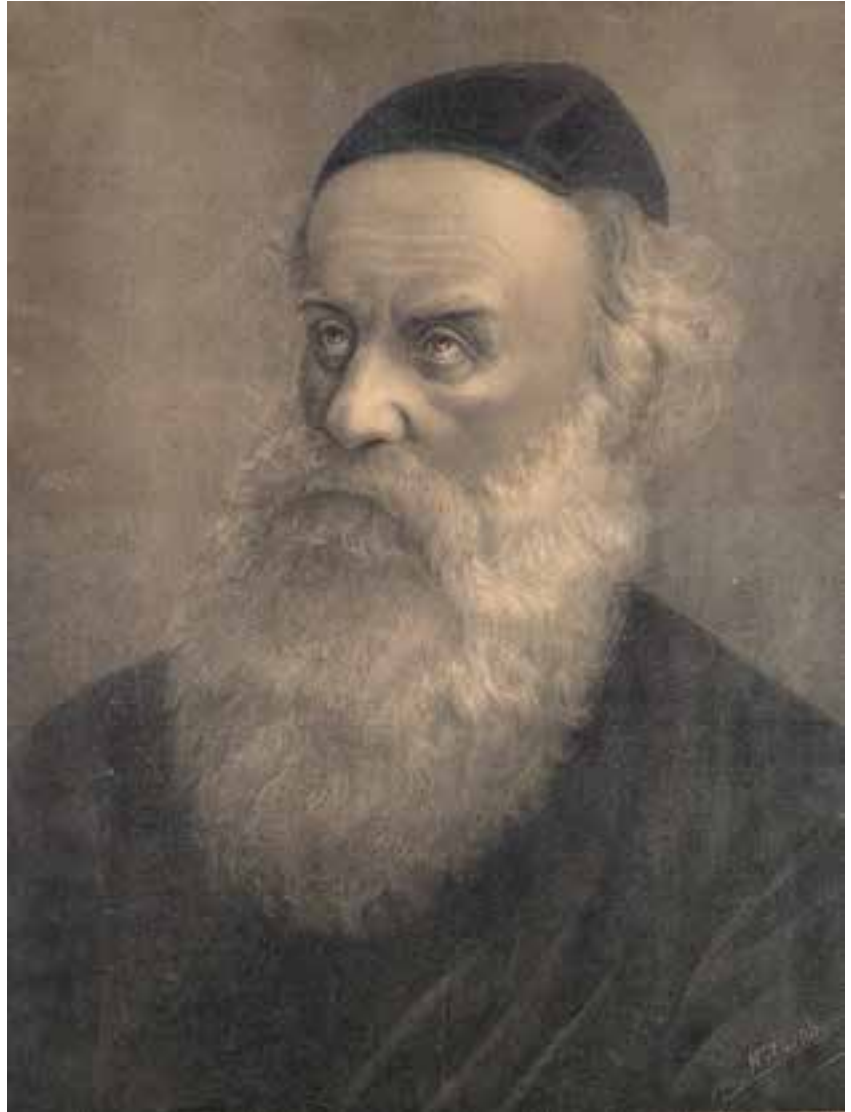
That Rosh Hashanah, these two *tzaddikim* knew that the fate of Russia rested in their hands. The battle would be fought by Napoleon and the Russian armies but the outcome would be determined in Heaven.

Victory would go to the Rebbe who blew *shofar* first on Rosh Hashanah.

The big day arrived and the Koznitzer Maggid woke up early in the morning. He rushed to the *mikveh* and immediately gathered together a *minyan*. They quickly davened *Shacharis*, and skipping all of the usual *hachanos* and *kavanos*, the Maggid lifted the *shofar* to his lips to blow.

But before he could blow, he suddenly lowered the *shofar*, sighed, and said "The *Litvak* (referring to the Alter Rebbe) was quicker, he won."

It turned out that the Alter Rebbe didn't even wait to daven. He simply blew *shofar* at dawn, well before davening, and then davened normally at the usual time and at the regular pace.¹⁰



A REPEAT OF THE KHMELNITSKY MASSACRE

On Rosh Hashanah morning, the Alter Rebbe called in the Mitteler Rebbe and the Tzemach Tzedek. He said, "Today during davening I saw that there has been a change for the better and that we have won the war. Although the enemy will still take Moscow, he will have no respite. Relief

and deliverance will arise for us, so it was inscribed Above.

But the war was not yet over.

On Shabbos Shuva, the Alter Rebbe again called them in. He said that the Khmelnitzky Massacres of 5408 had only affected Poland and Ukraine, and Russia would now suffer the same; for although Napoleon would be defeated, his retreat back to France would be accompanied by death and



destruction, with him burning and destroying every village and city in his path.

Erev Yom Kippur, they arrived in Vladimir; the French army had just taken Moscow and the entire Russian Senate was passing through Vladimir in a great haste, escaping Moscow.

The Mittler Rebbe writes:

When I saw their rushing carriages, I ran to Father, heartbroken, and with tears in my eyes. I called him to the window, saying, "See, Father, the flight of the Senate. What about your promise that the enemy will suffer a debacle upon taking Moscow." Father came up to me, embraced me, and said these words stemming from the depth of his heart: "You see that I am now wearing *tefillin*, and I will not deceive you. I assure you by my very life that the enemy will not go beyond Moscow, but will soon turn back. He will not turn to Petersburg, but his aim will be to return home, and to find provisions en route through White Russia."¹¹

SPYING ON THE FRENCH

One of the *talmidim* in the "*cheder*" of the Alter Rebbe was a Chossid named Reb Moshe Meisels.

Reb Moshe, in addition to being a tremendous *lamdan* in *nigleh* and Chassidus, was also fluent in many languages, including French.

He not only spoke French but he also had many French friends, was a frequent visitor to France and, in general, was well versed in French culture.

When Napoleon began his campaign against Russia, Reb Moshe was naturally one of his supporters.

In Reb Moshe's hometown of Vilna, French officers and secret agents began arriving to prepare for the imminent invasion of Russia. Reb Moshe

welcomed them into his home, and quickly became friends with French officers stationed in Vilna.

All this changed the moment he found out that the Alter Rebbe was against Napoleon. Reb Moshe did not reveal to the French his change of heart. He remained friends with them and was a regular at the French military headquarters, but secretly he began feeding information to the Russian army.

One day, a Russian ammunition warehouse in a Vilna suburb suddenly blew up.

The attack took the Russians completely by surprise because no French soldiers had been seen in the area.

Worse still, did this mean that there was a French spy in the Russian army? If so, there were additional warehouses to be concerned about. If they didn't know how this one had exploded, they couldn't prepare for another possible attack.

Outside of the French, the only person who knew how it had been done was Reb Moshe.

Two French agents disguised as Russian peasants walked late at night through the neighborhood where the warehouse was. They were drunk, or more accurately, pretended to be drunk, and like any drunken peasants it wasn't long before they got into a fight.

The fight "happened" to be right in front of the weapons warehouse. While they were fighting, one of the "peasants" picked up a stone and threw it at his friend. His aim was off that day and the stone went right through a window of the warehouse.

The soldier guarding the warehouse swiftly pounced on them and proceeded to arrest them. They began to cry, explaining that they hadn't meant any harm, that it had been an accident, and that they're just two drunken peasants on the way home.

You're a Russian spy!

The one that threw the stone even offered to go right away and hire a glazier to install a new window, at his own expense.

The soldier agreed. A new window was installed that same night, and everyone went home.

The next day, the warehouse suddenly exploded. The Russians didn't realize that the new window was no ordinary glass. The installer, a French agent, had put glass that was partly a magnifying glass, and positioned it so that the sun would shine through the magnifying glass right onto a barrel of gunpowder. This lit the barrel on fire and blew up the whole building.

Nobody except the French knew how it had been done, besides for Reb Moshe. He also knew that they were planning on doing the same thing to the main warehouse in Vilna, which would not only be a huge loss for the Russians but could also destroy an entire neighborhood.

Reb Moshe alerted the Russians to the plan, and when two peasants started fighting outside that warehouse they were immediately arrested.

When the French finally invaded Russia, for a period of time Napoleon's headquarters was in Vilna. Reb Moshe was a frequent visitor to the great general.

It is told that many times Napoleon himself consulted with Reb Moshe about military strategy, not imagining for a second that he was talking to a Russian spy.

One time Reb Moshe was in a room with a group of French generals who were poring over maps, arguing over the best route to Moscow. This was vital information for the Russians to know and Reb Moshe was listening

carefully. Suddenly the door burst open and Napoleon himself rushed in. He began screaming at the generals and berating them for not yet deciding on a plan.

Napoleon went over to the map and started pointing at different roads that he thought they should take.

Suddenly, he noticed Reb Moshe standing off to the side and felt that Reb Moshe was showing too much interest in what was going on. He ran over to him, grabbed his hand, and looked him straight in his eyes.

Reb Moshe didn't move a muscle or show any emotion. Napoleon screamed, "You're a Russian spy!" and put his hand on Reb Moshe's heart to feel if it started beating faster from fear. Again, no reaction. Napoleon, satisfied that he was not a spy, left him and went back to the table.

Later on Reb Moshe explained that the "aleph beis" of Chassidus, the concept of *moach shalit al haleiv*, the mind maintaining control over the heart, saved him at that moment, and he was able to exercise complete control over his emotions.¹²

Besides for being a spy himself, Reb Moshe also organized a network of Chassidim to spy on the French army and report to the Russians.¹³

Another prominent Chossid who spied on the French was the Alter Rebbe's son, Reb Moshe. During the war he was arrested by the French occupiers for treason and sentenced to death. Not much is known about these activities except that the French army was defeated before the judgement could be carried out.¹⁴



In the Alter Rebbe's time, France represented an irreparable *kelipa*, threatening to contaminate her surroundings as well. Almost 200 years later, with the Rebbe's work, the country was completely transformed.

The Rebbe explained that the final *birur* (refinement) of France represents the *birur* of the entire world in preparation for the *geula*, in which we see two important components of a true *birur*. Firstly, that the *tachton*—the lower level which is being transformed—continues to exist in its unique form even after the *birur* is accomplished (instead of being completely obliterated and nullified). And secondly, its *birur* was implemented through *gilui ha'etzem*, which is expressed in the fact that the work there was accomplished, both in a revealed sense and a hidden way, through our Rabbeim.

This is exactly what will happen when Moshiach comes. As the *possuk* states, ועלו מושיעים בהר ציון—They will go up to *Har Eisav*, and show over there, in that very situation, that 'ה' המלוכה, that Hashem is king of the world.¹⁵

This truly is !דיידן נצח!¹⁶ 1

1. Igros Kodesh Admur Haemtza'i page 237.
2. Hamasa Ha'acharon page 283.
3. Sotah *daf* 49.
4. Hamasa Ha'acharon page 78.
5. Hamasa Ha'acharon page 78.
6. Hamasa Ha'acharon page 73.
7. Hamasa Ha'acharon page 280.
8. Igros Kodesh Admur Ha'Emtza'i p. 242.
9. In some places this story is brought down with Reb Shlomo of Karlin as the Alter Rebbe's opponent. However, in a letter printed in Igros Kodesh vol. 15 p. 450, the Rebbe points out that Reb Shlomo of Karlin passed away many years before the war with Napoleon, and the protagonist is the Maggid of Koznitz.
10. Lubavitcher Rebbe's Zichronos—Yiddish, vol. 3 p. 2.
11. Igros Kodesh Admur Haemtza'i p. 243.
12. Hamasa Ha'acharon p. 82.
13. Reshimas Hayoman p. 339.
14. Hamasa Ha'acharon p. 59.
15. Ibid, P. 182-183.
16. See *The French Revolution*, Derher Shevat 5776.

